

“Hearing the Shepherd’s Voice”

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to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).*

This week, I travelled to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis to attend a conference on preaching called the “Day of Homiletical Reflection.” The keynote speaker was a man named Thomas Troeger. Dr. Troeger is a pastor, poet and hymn writer who has contributed two hymns to our own hymnal. He also serves on the faculty of the Yale Divinity School as *Professor of Preaching and Christian Communications*. He reads or hears thousands of sermons each year by some of the most skilled preachers in the world. In many ways, his life’s work revolves around the preaching of the church, and when this homiletic expert was asked what he’d like to hear in today’s sermons, his answer was profound. He leaned into the microphone and simply said, “I’d like to hear more about God.”

In today’s Scripture readings (and hymns) we learn a great deal about God, and we do so through one of the oldest and most recognizable images in the Bible: The Good Shepherd. As long as the church has existed, the picture of a Shepherd has been used to tell us about God; to communicate information about the One who calls, feeds and cares for His sheep even at the cost of His own life. David wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1). We’ve heard these words countless times and we are comforted by their familiar cadence, but what do they really mean? How does God shepherd His people?

Part of the answer to this question is found in today’s text from the book of Acts. Here we find a very practical, very clear picture of how God shepherds us. Luke writes that following the miracle of Pentecost, the Church, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

On that first Christian Pentecost, the city of Jerusalem was filled with Jews from all over the world who had come to celebrate the harvest feast. And it was here, in this crowded and festive atmosphere, that the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and Peter began to preach, and by the end of that day, about three thousand people were added to the Church. And do you know what Peter did in this powerful sermon? He told them about God! He preached about Christ crucified and risen and, even today, this message is the essence of the Church. Our faith is founded on these historical, objective facts about God. *What did the apostles teach about God?* They taught that Christ died for our sins and they taught that God raised Jesus to life.

It seems too simple! It seems too small a thing. How can this uncomplicated, unassuming, modest message actually make a difference in people’s lives? Our pride tells us that there must be something else we need to search out; there must be some deeper path; some greater insight; some cryptic key that will lead to a glorious new level of spiritual enlightenment. And this desire is nothing more than our sinful inclination to add to what God has done; to insert ourselves into the equation. We need to take God at His Word. In repentant faith, we need to believe His promises and receive God as God has presented Himself – even if it looks worthless to the world.

Peter preached Christ crucified and risen! And when the people heard his message they were “cut to the heart” and they asked the apostles what they should do. And here, Peter again talked about God where God promises to be. “Repent and be baptized” Peter said, “for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” He didn’t send them on some grand spiritual safari designed to uncover hidden truths. He didn’t demand proof of their worthiness or a display of deep theological insight. No, Peter simply said, “Repent and be baptized.” And this is the voice of the Shepherd.

In Psalm 23, David wrote about God saying, “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:2-3). And in the waters of Holy Baptism God does exactly what He says: He forgives...He fills...He leads...He liberates...He restores the soul. And in the “breaking of bread” God reveals Himself as One who comes to us and is present with us in the body and blood of His Son.

In Acts 2:42, Luke tells us that this is what the Church did: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Don’t forget this verse! These words are not merely an historic description of an ancient and dead church; rather in these words Luke describes the life of the Church today. The Apostle’s teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer: This is where God is found! This is where God tells us about Himself. This is the completely unique function and work of the Church. *Here*, in the Apostles’ teaching and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and in prayer our Good Shepherd leads us “in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” *Here*, “Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, for God is with us.” *Here*, “He prepares a table before us and fills our cup to overflowing.” And because of what God does here, “we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

We gather here in worship to do what no one else in the world can do...to proclaim that Jesus has come, that He has shed His blood for the world’s sins, that He has risen from the dead for the world’s salvation, and that He is constantly among us offering Himself for our eternal life. In the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer we learn about God...but the work of the Good Shepherd doesn’t stop here. Not only does God call, feed, defend and care for us. The Good Shepherd also takes care of the world, and He does it through *the Christ* embodied in *you*; through your love, through your forgiveness, through your mercy lived out in real life, lived out in the everyday opportunities God gives you to love another.

Just as God reveals Himself through simple Word and Sacrament, He also reveals Himself to the world through the simple service you and I do for our neighbors. God feeds us, so we can feed others. God comforts us, so we can comfort others. God loves us, so we can love others. The center of our text describes this very thing as Luke writes, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

These early believers weren’t communists driven by some utopian ideal. They were Christians who had joined themselves to Christ – not just in some supernatural, esoteric way – but people who had experienced the body of Christ in every way, and now, through their own physical bodies – in concrete, specific, and practical ways – they shared what Christ had given them with those who needed to know about God.

The Gospel had given them the freedom to do this; to love as Christ had loved them by giving up His life for them as their Good Shepherd; to serve their neighbor as Christ had served them. This was *then* and is *now* the life of the Church, the Church outside the church building, the Church that serves others with Christ’s gifts embodied in us, and in our active, caring and real expression of love, we tell them about God...and they hear the voice of the Shepherd.

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